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Manuscripts, Incunables, Books: How and Why the World Chronicles Changed

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Manuscripts, Incunables, Books: How and Why the World Chronicles Changed

When one switches from hand-worked labor to automated labor, it can be assumed that there is a physical change in the final product. Whether it be the use of cheaper material, a shift in design and style, or a further customizability, these changes signified a change within the product itself, which can best be seen in the early decades of the printing revolution, for example in the shift from manuscripts and their traditional materials, styles, and designs to the recognizable designs of modern books, which can already be found in early printed books (prior to 1500), known as incunables.¹ That is not to suggest that changes in the production of books were universal, uniform, or constant. A good example of this is provided by the *Fasciculus temporum* of Werner Rolewinck which, as noted by Margaret Bingham Stillwell, was a highly popular text, with editions printed from 1474 to 1500.² The *Fasciculus temporum* showcased many of the design changes stated above, but also demonstrated a link from earlier manuscript chronicles to incunables.

The basic purpose and outline of a world chronicle such as Rolewinck's was to outline the history of humanity, earthly kingdoms and leadership, and Christendom. Though Nicolaus Götz is given credit by some for creating the first printed world chronicles, his organizational system was hard to follow and it was another Köln printer, Arnold Therhoernen (d. 1483/1484), who organized the *Fasciculus* into indexes and timelines that were more appealing and

¹ <https://www.britannica.com/topic/incunabula>

² Margaret Bingham Stillwell, "The *Fasciculus temporum*: A Genealogical Survey of Editions before 1480," in *Bibliographical Essays: A Tribute to Wilberforce Eames*, edited by Wilberforce Eames (New York: B. Franklin, 1968), 410.

accessible to the consuming public. To put it succinctly: Götz compiled the research, Therhoernen organized it, and as the writing tradition of the time would dictate, other authors would add their events and notes. This was the same for the *Fasciculus temporum*, which had blank pages and additions so the work could be continued at a later date. However, our edition differs in that it does not contain these additional commentary pieces by the author.³

When inspecting the edition of the *Fasciculus temporum* in the Portland State University codex, we must take certain factors into consideration: when it was made, who made it, and who it was for, and then compare it against other editions. In this scenario we will compare our 1490 edition of the *Fasciculus temporum* against the 1480 *Fasciculus* printed in Utrecht, and to other 1480 editions. At cursory glance, one would assume that the Utrecht edition was of a later rather than earlier date than PSU's edition, as it is of finer quality and more finely detailed and written. However, it has the characteristics of a manuscript, for example, larger-font first letters, known as initials. Our *Fasciculus* lacks these initials, but it does have something the Utrecht version does not: page headers. Compared to earlier editions, the PSU *FT* lacks the heavily decorated initial letters of chapters and the differently inked initial letters of sentences. The 1480 Dutch edition, a 1480 Köln edition, and the 1480 Utrecht edition all contain these manuscript style initials, but our 1490 version does not. These earlier versions also seem to be far clearer in print than our Strasbourg incunable; however, our edition seems to omit certain details the others contain. First, it omits the dates within the two upper and lower lines and gives them one bold date. Our editions' parallel chronologies are more akin in labeling to chapters. Though our edition makes use of page headers, it notably does not utilize page numbers, or even printing

³ *Chronicles of the Kings of England*, Beinecke Rare Book & Manuscript Library, Yale University, 2013 (<https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Record/4180622>). I have had the benefit of prior research experience into scroll manuscripts, specifically this chronicle.

signatures which indicate the manner in which pages are folded. The *Fasciculus temporum*'s format is quite simple: it splits the page in two, with the two halves representing the Anno Domini and the Anno Mundi (counted from Creation). This format allows for a clear representation of the linear path of time and history, with the many periods of history further depicted through the key figures.

Our *Fasciculus temporum* is not alone in its basic layout, which it shares with most editions, as the core of its layout is the rondels, dividers, and the halved pages. But it is the minute detail in the filler pages that must be appreciated. Even as book format changed across Europe, printed world chronicles were different. World chronicles were often organized by printers to appear older and retain their continuity with their medieval manuscript predecessors.

However, it should also be noted that printers could have done these layouts themselves, perhaps from being old types and presses from previous failed printers, or perhaps they could not experiment due to financial difficulties. There was one theory that the edition we have in our collection was an older edition that had gone unsold until it was later bought for less and joined with the *Malleus*, but its unique printed qualities renders this moot. We can confirm that it's not an earlier, poor edition sold later. Moreover, the 1480 edition of the *FT* printed for the bishop of Utrecht was likely designed for clients who desired a more gorgeous but manuscript-esque chronicle versus a more modern edition. That earlier editions of the *FT* were modified to suit buyers' tastes may suggest that our copy of the *Fasciculus temporum* was also designed with buyer preferences in mind, but based on how expensive it would have been to pay for changes to the layout and design, this hypothesis seems unlikely. Another explanation for the layout and style of our edition of the *FT* is that the printer was merely focused on updating earlier editions

and did not focus on adding new details in his print shop. Ongoing research will need to delve further into the intricacies of the transformation of manuscripts to incunables to books.

The basic layout of a world chronicle utilized parallel chronologies, both beginning with the birth of Christ: one chronology ran forwards to the publication date; the other ran backwards to creation. Earlier editions of the *FT* inverted the upper half of the timeline, but by the 1480 editions this format was dropped in favor of a more coherent, and by the 1490 edition, more streamlined organization. Indeed, while earlier editions contained side notes and annotations to the chronicle, our edition does not, indicating these were dropped either at the author's request (Rolewinck was active in overseeing the printing of his chronicle) or by the printer.

The fascinating design of the *Fasciculus temporum*, which remained a staple in all editions, consisted of a series of circles between the parallel, double-dated lines that split the page in half – and sometimes were separated into sub-categories in both halves. These circles are known as rondels, and were featured, for example, in the medieval manuscript of the Chronicles of the Kings of England (1100-1500).⁴ These rondels, or as Stilwell referred to them, “circles,” are most likely a sign of divinity or divine touch. Stillwell notes when describing the rondels' purpose in the 1478 edition of the *Fasciculus temporum* that figures from Adam through Christ and from St Peter to the popes were set off by rondels; one can even notice in our edition that the anti-popes of the 1480s were given half-rondels.⁵ But why were kings given the same treatment in the *Fasciculus temporum*? Perhaps to signify that they are God-appointed.

The designs of the printed *Fasciculus temporum* came from a variety of different sources. The layout of the Therhoernen version may have been inspired by the layout of medieval

⁴ Stillwell, “The *Fasciculus temporum*. A Genealogical Survey.”

⁵ Stillwell's explanation of the exact genealogy and of the differing designs utilized is far more in-depth and is a recommended read.

chronicles. Later changes to the editions, outside of those done by the author, were often performed by printers for the customers' tastes. And as the memory of manuscripts slowly faded, incunables changed from resembling heavily decorated facsimiles of manuscripts to simpler designs such as that evident in the PSU *Fasciculus*. In short, our edition of the *Fasciculus temporum* allows for us to shine a spotlight on a variety of changes, motivations, legacies, and choices in the evolution from medieval scrolls to printed books.

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